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Sent: Tue 11/13/2012 1:55:58 PM
Subject: Greenwire: EPA seeks existing data for nationwide study

EPA seeks existing data for nationwide study

Ellen M. Gilmer, E&E reporter

Published: Tuesday, November 13, 2012

Federal regulators are reaching out to industry, environmentalists and researchers for any peer-reviewed data that shed light on hydraulic fracturing's effect on drinking water.

U.S. EPA plans to sift through the research to inform its own study of the widespread oil and gas extraction method known as fracking. The report, due to be complete in 2014, will assess the safety of the practice, which involves blasting millions of gallons of chemical-laced water and sand underground.

As the practice spreads nationwide, especially in areas underlain by shale rock that require the use of fracking to free up hydrocarbons, critics have questioned whether state and federal regulations are strict enough to prevent water contamination.

In Pennsylvania, one driller was cleared of charges that fracking chemicals had entered drinking water, but was held responsible for methane that had migrated into water wells in 2009. In an ongoing investigation in Wyoming, fracking chemicals have been detected in deep groundwater, but not in the area's drinking water. Still, determinations are clouded by differences in results and methods of EPA, the U.S. Geological Survey and the state of Wyoming.

Concerns also abound over the management of drilling wastewater, which can be reused, treated, injected underground or left in a pit. In Pennsylvania, regulators pushed gas drillers last year to stop dumping brine into local rivers, which were becoming polluted with the salty and metallic waste.

In a Federal Register notice last week, EPA cited the need to address public concern -- churned up by such instances -- by testing water and analyzing existing research.

A progress report on the study is expected in the next month or two. EPA science adviser Glenn Paulson said at a conference in Pittsburgh last week that the agency is on track to produce a report with "pretty close to definitive" conclusions about fracking's effect on water, according to the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

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